

Public Health

Seattle & King County Fact Sheet

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

WHAT IS IT?

SARS is a term used to describe a new, serious, contagious, respiratory illness that is often severe. SARS has been reported in Asia, North America, and Europe. The term is applied when someone has developed SARS symptoms and has either traveled to an area of the world where it has been confirmed that SARS is spreading in the community or has had contact with an ill traveler who had been to one of the affected areas. A virus is suspected to be the cause of SARS. SARS appears to spread from person to person during close contact with infected persons.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SARS?

The main symptoms of SARS are high fever (greater than 100.4 F), dry cough, shortness of breath or breathing difficulties. Changes in chest X-rays indicative of pneumonia also occur. Other SARS symptoms include headache, muscle ache, and loss of appetite, malaise, confusion, rash, and diarrhea. These symptoms are typical for many respiratory illnesses. Therefore many people who are currently described as having suspected SARS may actually have other respiratory illnesses. At this time there is no readily available laboratory test to confirm SARS infection.

WHERE ARE THE PLACES WHERE THE SPREAD OF SARS IN THE COMMUNITY HAS BEEN CONFIRMED?

As of April 30, 2003, the places where current or recent spread of SARS in the community has been confirmed include: People's Republic of China (i.e., mainland China and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region); Hanoi, Vietnam; Singapore; Toronto, Canada or Taiwan.

HOW CONTAGIOUS IS SARS?

Based on currently available evidence, close contact with an infected person poses the highest risk of spreading SARS to others. In Asia, the majority of suspected SARS cases have occurred among hospital workers who have cared for SARS patients and in household contacts of patients.

In the United States, ninety percent of cases have been travelers to the above areas. The risk of transmission from person-to-person within the United States appears minimal when people have followed proper infection control practices.

IS IT SAFE TO TRAVEL? WHAT IS MY RISK ON AN AIRPLANE? IF I HAD TRAVELED WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Health officials are advising the public to postpone indefinitely travel to areas where the spread of SARS in the community has been confirmed. There is evidence that exposure to SARS has occurred while on airplanes. If you have traveled to one of the areas listed above, you should monitor your health for respiratory illness symptoms for at least 10 days after you return to the United States. While you remain well, you may return to your normal activities. If you become ill during the 10 days, be suspicious that the illness could be SARS, and consult your health care provider. Stay away from others while you are ill.

HOW CAN SARS BE PREVENTED?

If you have a respiratory infection, the following steps can help prevent the spread of the illness to others.

1. Maintain good personal hygiene. Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
2. Keep your hands clean. Wash hands when they come in contact with all body fluids including respiratory secretions.
3. Avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth. When you must touch your eyes, nose, and mouth, wash your hands first.
4. Stay away from others if you develop respiratory symptoms.
5. Do not share items such as cigarettes, towels, lipstick, toys, or other items that are likely to be contaminated with respiratory secretions.
6. Clean up surfaces contaminated with body fluids promptly with a good disinfectant solution. Follow the manufacturers' instructions when using any disinfectant, and wear gloves.
7. Do not share food or drink with others.
8. Use serving utensils at meal times.
9. Use dishwashers and washing machines to clean dishes or clothes that are usually washed by hand. They will provide a higher level of cleaning than if you clean these items by hand.

10. Make sure that bathrooms are always stocked with soap and disposable paper towels or hand dryers.
11. Promptly dispose of used tissue paper in a waste receptacle.
12. Provide good air ventilation to indoor spaces. Consider opening a window to let in extra air.
13. Take care of yourself to improve your immune system defenses. Eat a balanced diet, and get adequate rest. Avoid smoking.
14. Consult your doctor promptly if you develop respiratory symptoms, and follow instructions given by your doctor including the use of drugs as prescribed and adequate rest as appropriate.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE SARS?

If you think that you have SARS, you should consult your usual health care provider. If possible, call ahead and advise the health care provider of the potential that the illness could be SARS. Stay home from work, school and other public activities until Public Health or your health care provider notifies that it is safe for you to resume your normal activities. Masks can be worn by SARS patients to protect others, by persons who are household contacts, or health care workers of SARS patients.

WHAT IS PUBLIC HEALTH DOING ABOUT SARS?

Public Health works in several ways to deal with SARS:

- Increasing public and health care provider awareness in order to detect, investigate, and respond to cases early.
- Educating the public about prevention and control activities.
- Updating the public about the occurrence of SARS.
- Collaborating with state, federal, and international health authorities to contribute to the collective knowledge about how to deal with SARS.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SARS?

Additional information about SARS is available at the Public Health website, www.metrokc.gov/health, the CDC website, www.cdc.gov, and the WHO website www.who.org.